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Fundamental Ambiguity – The Failure of
Compromise during the American Secession
Crisis

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the key attempts at reaching compromise between the secessionists of the Southern States and the Republican administration of Abraham Lincoln during the Secession Crisis of 1860-61. The question of why compromise failed to prevent the Civil War is analysed first in the context of the Secession Crisis itself. Then, the nature of an American compromise and Constitutional liberty is defined with the work of philosopher George Santayana, and an overview of the three main phases of historiography, traditionalist, revisionist, and post-revisionist, is provided. After that, the two main strands of reasoning behind the long-term failure of compromise, the idea that the North and South developed irreconcilable sectional differences that could not be compromised over, and the pervasion of dualistic moral abstractions preventing reasoned discussion of political issues, are elucidated on. Ultimately, it is argued that the failure to reach an enduring compromise stemmed from fundamental ambiguity in the Constitution, particularly in regards to slavery.

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Introduction

On the fourteenth of November 1860, Alexander H. Stephens, retired representative and future Vice-President of the Confederate States of America, gave a speech to the Legislature of Georgia.¹ The topic was how Georgia should respond to the election of Abraham Lincoln and the ascendancy of the Republican Party to the White House. Lincoln had won a close, but definite, majority. Yet he had not won a single state in the South.² The antislavery ideology that was central to the Republican platform was fundamentally opposed to that of the South, and although it was not abolitionist, radical thought dominated the Party; abolishing the evil of slavery was clearly the end goal of the Republican ideal.³ Therefore despite Lincoln's repeated assurances that he would not act outside of the Constitution and would not interfere with slavery where it already existed, the fact that he represented the antithesis of everything proslavery Americans stood for, combined with the slim, sectional margin by which he was elected, was enough to sound the klaxons of secession amongst the South once again. It is this call for secession that Stephens is responding to. His speech, given scarcely a week after Lincoln's election, does not bear any inflammatory secessionist rhetoric. Instead he calls for a moderate, reasoned response to what was indisputably a legal, Constitutional election. Just because an antislavery man has been elected president did not mean that Southerners have to choose between abolition rule and aggressive

¹ Richard Malcolm Johnson, William Hand Browne, *The Life of Alexander H. Stephens*, (J. B. Lippincott & Co.: Philadelphia, 1878), p. 367

² David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis: 1848-1861*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher, (Harper & Row: New York, 1976), p. 447

³ Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War*, (Oxford University Press: 1995), p. 214

disunion.⁴ After all, sectional differences had caused strife before: first in 1833 over the imposition of a tariff favourable to the North but not the South, then in the wake of the Mexican War over the expansion of slavery into the newly conquered territory.⁵ On both of these occasions a compromise was reached, the compromises of 1833 and 1850 respectively. Radical Southern secessionists, colloquially known as fire-eaters, had promoted secession as valid response at both of these junctures, arguing that implacable Northern interests pervaded Congress and made no consideration towards the needs of the South.⁶ Yet the majority of Southerners did not rally to this cause, and those that did succumb to the secession furore quickly came back into the unionist fold once a satisfactory compromise had been reached.⁷ These men and women were proud Georgians, Virginians, Mississippians and so forth, but they were also proud Americans. They shared a history of revolution, a hatred of tyranny, and a love of liberty with their brethren in New York, Massachusetts, and Illinois. Although the nature of the Southern economy, culture, and society differed from that of the North, the majority of Americans had faith that their system of Constitutional Democracy would allow for dissenting views to be discussed and synthesized into a mutually beneficial compromise. It is this faith that Stephens is appealing to. Lincoln and the Republicans *might* represent a threat to the South *if* they renege on the tenets of the Georgia Platform, the

⁴ Alexander H. Stephens, 'Speech before the Legislature of Georgia: Milledgeville, November 14, 1860', in Johnson, Richard Malcolm, Browne William Hand, *The Life of Alexander H. Stephens*, (J. B. Lippincott & Co.: Philadelphia, 1878), p. 577

⁵ Merrill D. Peterson, *Olive Branch and Sword – The Compromise of 1833*, (Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge, 1982), p. 5; Potter, *The Impeding Crisis*, pp. 113-114

⁶ Avery O. Craven, *Civil War in the Making: 1815-1860*, (Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge, 1959), pp. 40-42

⁷ Potter, *The Impeding Crisis*, p. 128

basis on which the Compromise of 1850 was formulated.⁸ So long as Lincoln did not make an unconstitutional act against the South there was no grounds for secession.⁹ Compromise within the Union was not only possible, but it should be sought after above and beyond any move towards aggressive disunion.

Methodology

Yet compromise was not achieved during the Secession Crisis. The spirit of the fire-eaters overtook the South and ordinances of secession were adopted in quick order.¹⁰ Stephens, who spoke so ardently in the name of the Union, became Vice-President of the Confederate States of America on the eleventh of February 1861.¹¹ Why then did Stephens and so many other Americans, Northern and Southern, choose Civil War over compromise during the Secession Crisis? That question has not been definitively answered. Why the Civil War occurred and precisely how it came about is the subject of a vast amount of historiography that shares similar motifs, yet does not reach anything close to a complete consensus. It would be audacious for this paper to make any claims towards resolving this issue. However through an examination of the key schools of Civil War historiography I have identified two main of strands of thought in relation to why compromise failed. The first of these is the idea that irreconcilable economic, social, and ideological differences developed between

⁸ Stephens, 'Speech before the Legislature of Georgia: Milledgeville, November 14, 1860', p. 568

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 579

¹⁰ For a timeline of the conventions for and ordinances of Secession, see Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, pp. 491-492, 498-499

¹¹ Rudolph von Abele, *Alexander H. Stephens: A Biography*, (Alfred A. Knopf Inc.: New York, 1946), p. 195

the Northern and Southern sections and fostered an irrepressible conflict. The second holds that compromise should have been possible during the Secession Crisis, yet was made impossible by the pervasion of dualistic moral abstractions throughout American society. In formulating these strands I have first examined the main compromise attempts during the Secession Crisis and the localized reasons as to why they failed. Then I have defined exactly what constitutes an American compromise through the use of the work of Brazilian-American philosopher George Santayana. After a brief overview of the three main phases of historiography, traditionalist, revisionist, and post-revisionist, I have examined the two main strands that offer an explanation to the failure of compromise. Both of these strands are found within scholarship that deals with long term issues in ante-bellum American history as well as works that focus on the Secession Crisis. Therefore it is necessary to analyse the underlying causes of the Civil War in order to reach a conclusion on the historiographical treatment of compromise as a whole. The objective of this paper is not to definitively resolve the origins of the Civil War, nor to answer exactly why American congressmen rejected compromise during the Secession Crisis. However it does aim to illuminate the historiographical response as to why compromise, one of the most crucial and admired elements of American Constitutionalism, did not prevent a national calamity during the Secession Crisis.

Crittenden and Corwin: The Compromises of the Secession Crisis

The failure of compromise cannot be attributed to a lack of trying. The one hundred and fifty-seven days from Lincoln's election on November sixth 1860 to the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter on April twelfth 1861 saw a number of attempts at reaching a compromise, the vast majority of which were deemed unacceptable to both fire-eaters and Republicans, and were not discussed outside the halls of Congress.¹² However the compromise proposal of Kentucky senator John J. Crittenden did have terms that had a realistic chance of halting disunion. It proposed a number of constitutional amendments that could potentially allay Southern fears of Lincoln taking unconstitutional actions towards the South. The execution of the Fugitive Slave Law, the inability of Congress to abolish slavery in places where it already exists, and the extension of slavery to all territories below the latitude 36° 30' currently held and hereafter acquired by the United States were to be enshrined within the Constitution, and Congress was to be unable to interfere with these amendments.¹³ These conditions, in particular the unlimited extension of slavery, were the only ones that the fire-eaters found agreeable. Lincoln and the Republicans however, did not. To permanently enshrine the extension of slavery within the Constitution meant giving up the entire Republican platform

¹² David M. Potter, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis*, (Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge, 1970), p. 47

¹³ 'Amendments Proposed in Congress by Senator John J. Crittenden: December 18, 1860', http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/critten.asp, last accessed 10 Oct. 2014

and sabotaging the antislavery morals that they held to be self-evident truths.¹⁴ Therefore it could not be part of a true compromise; the fire-eaters were asking too much of the Republicans.

This fact dominated the Senate Committee of Thirteen that was called to discuss the validity of Crittenden's proposal which met on the twentieth of December 1860. The Southern congressmen who were sent, Jefferson Davis and Robert Toombs, would not vote in favour of Crittenden's plan unless a majority of the Republicans did so, given their history of immovable antislavery opposition to any compromise measure.¹⁵ The five Republican senators followed the lead of William H. Seward, the de facto leader of the Party before Lincoln's inauguration on the fourth of March 1861. He had just received word of Lincoln's policy regarding the territories ('Entertain no proposition in regard to the extension of slavery.') and as such led his contingent in unanimously voting down the proposal.¹⁶ The other members of the committee consisted of three senators from Kentucky (including Crittenden himself) and three Northern Democrats. Of these men, only Crittenden and two others were universally behind the compromise; two of the Democrats sided with the Southerners in not voting in favour of the compromise unless the Republicans did so.¹⁷ Seward did put forward compromise terms that would be acceptable to the Republicans, yet because they did not make a decisive ruling on the extension of slavery they were dismissed by the Southerners as another half-hearted effort at

¹⁴ Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, p. 40

¹⁵ Potter, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis*, p. 171

¹⁶ Abraham Lincoln, 'Letter to William Kellogg, Dec. 11 1860', *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln Vol. IV*, ed. Roy P. Basler, (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, 1953), p. 150

¹⁷ Potter, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis*, pp. 110-111

conciliation.¹⁸ Because of this an agreement could not be reached, and the commission reported back to the Senate on the last day of 1860 that it had disbanded and could give no recommendations regarding compromise.¹⁹

Other attempts at formulating a compromise were made in the months leading up to Fort Sumter, most notably the compromise of Representative Thomas Corwin of Ohio and the efforts of the February Peace Conference held in Virginia. The latter was rendered irrelevant by the complete absence of any Southern delegates; several states had already seceded at this point and were past considering a compromise within the Union.²⁰ The former, created within the Committee of Thirty-Three (the House of Representatives' equivalent of the Committee of Thirteen) appeared to be viable on paper. Indeed, its policy of admitting New Mexico Territory immediately as a slave state was put forward by the Republicans and therefore ostensibly not effected by the political manoeuvring that plagued the Committee of Thirteen.²¹ Unfortunately it was never designed to be an enduring compromise because it did not secure the resolution of the territorial issue that the Southerner's sought. As it stands the Corwin Compromise was meant more to shift the blame for refusing to compromise away from the Republicans and on to the Southern representatives.²² This was a fairly obvious political ploy. Although the Corwin Compromise did reach Congress in the heavily modified form of the Corwin

¹⁸ Walter Stahr, *Seward: Lincoln's Indispensable Man*, (Simon & Schuster: New York, 2012), p. 218

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, pp. 550-551

²¹ Kenneth M. Stampp, *And the War Came: The North and the Secession Crisis, 1860-61*, (University of Chicago Press: 1968), p. 129

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 173-175

Amendment (which would have prevented Congress from interfering with 'domestic institutions' such as slavery) it was never ratified and ultimately did nothing to prevent disunion.²³

The Nature of the American Compromise

Contextualized within the one hundred and fifty-seven days of the Secession Crisis, it is easy to attach the failure of the Crittenden and Corwin compromises to the stubborn refusal of Southern and Northern congressmen to give up some of the more dogmatic elements of their ideals in the name of the Union. It is also tempting to describe the failure of compromise as the failure of the entire American political system. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, the three founding fathers who authored the Federalist Papers (which analysed the potential positive and negative effects of the Constitutional Union) predicted the possibility of factional strife and the crippling effect it could have on the representative government. Federalist No. Ten in particular argued that democracy under the Constitution would prevent the need for armed revolution by always facilitating compromise in the name of the nation.²⁴ Clearly this did not happen in the Secession Crisis. Yet both of these answers are not correct in their entirety. For neither the Crittenden nor the Corwin Compromise were American compromises as the Founder's envisioned.

²³ Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, pp. 550-551

²⁴ James Madison, 'The Federalist Papers: No. 10', *New York Packet*, 23 Nov. 1787, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed10.asp, last accessed 10 Oct. 2014; see also Stamp, *And the War Came*, p. 35

What then, comprises an American compromise? And why is it so crucial to the spirit American liberty? Brazilian-American philosopher George Santayana provides the answer to these questions. He defines the American compromise as people ‘. . . meet[ing] in a genuine spirit of consultation, eager to persuade but ready to be persuaded . . . it is implicitly agreed, in every case, that disputed questions shall be put to a vote, and that the minority will loyally acquiesce in the decision of the majority and build henceforth upon it, without a thought of ever retracting it.’²⁵ Already this casts doubt over the validity of the Crittenden and Corwin compromises, as in both cases Northerners and Southerners lacked a completely genuine spirit in regards to formulating an agreeable solution to disunion. However it is Santayana’s definition of liberty that is most relevant in explaining why these compromises failed:

‘The practice of liberty presupposes two things: that all concerned are fundamentally unanimous, and that each has a plastic nature, which he is willing to modify. If fundamental unanimity is lacking and all are not making in the same general direction, there can be no honest co-operation, no satisfying compromise. Every concession, under such circumstances, would be a temporary one . . . it would amount to a mutilation of one’s essential nature, a partial surrender of life, liberty, and happiness, tolerable for a time, perhaps, as the lesser of two evils, but involving a perpetual sullen opposition and hatred.’²⁶

In the space of a paragraph, Santayana has identified heart of the failure of compromise. The North and the South were fundamentally unanimous on the ideals of liberty, democracy, and the pursuit of happiness, but not slavery.

²⁵ George Santayana, *Character & Opinion in the United States*, (New York: George Braziller, 1955), p. 110

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 115

The Founding Fathers however were unanimous on the evil of slavery. Yet because they looked forward to future generations to gradually remove the system from the United States they did not specifically state this in the Constitution.²⁷ Yet neither did they enshrine it as a fundamental value of American democracy. Because of this, slavery was left in a purposely ambiguous state in the Constitution; the Three Fifths Clause allowed for slaves to be vicariously represented in electoral votes, but there is no specific reference to slavery in the Constitution itself.²⁸ It is this fundamental ambiguity in regards to slavery within the Constitution that allowed Northerners and Southerners to develop two opposite, yet similar, debateable, yet justifiable, interpretations of American liberty. Stephens can claim that the Republicans are taking unconstitutional action towards the South in limiting the extension of slavery, because in his interpretation Southerners have the Constitutional right to take their property in slaves wherever they wish in the Union and its prospective Territories. Conversely, Lincoln can also claim, in response to Stephens' speech to the Legislature of Georgia, that the only substantial difference between them was that 'You think slavery is *right* and ought to be extended; while we think it is *wrong* and ought to be abolished.'²⁹ Lincoln is not being unreasonably deterministic here, placing personal morality above the reality of reaching a compromise and preventing disunion. He is presenting his interpretation of Constitutional Liberty, which he believes coincides with the

²⁷ Charles Grier Sellers, 'The Travail of Slavery', *The Southerner as an American*, ed. Charles Grier Sellers, (University of North Carolina Press: 1960), p. 45

²⁸ 'The United States Constitution, Article One, Section Two, Clause Three', http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/art1.asp, last accessed 10 Oct. 2014

²⁹ Abraham Lincoln, 'Letter to Alexander H. Stephens, Dec. 22 1860', *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln Vol. IV*, ed. Roy P. Basler, (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, 1953), p. 160

Founder's. Namely, that slavery is morally wrong. This is the ideal that guided Lincoln and the Republicans during the Secession Crisis. The Founding Father's purposely left this fact ambiguous in the Constitution, but in the Lincoln's view that was because they did not envisage a place for slavery in their more perfect union.³⁰ Stephens, and the Southerners that would eventually vote for secession, thought otherwise. Slavery was not necessarily a moral institution, but in the Southern interpretation of the Constitution the right to hold slaves was a guaranteed truth under American liberty. Because both of these views were held to be fundamental to Northern and Southern ideology respectively, and were ultimately drawn from the same source of the Constitution, they could not be compromised on. Santayana again provides a succinct explanation of this: 'In a hearty and sound democracy all questions at issue must be minor matters; fundamentals must have been silently agreed upon and taken for granted *when the democracy arose* [my italics].'³¹ Slavery was most certainly not a minor matter. Because its status within the United States was left ambiguous at the founding of the Union, the North and the South were free to develop conflicting interpretations towards it over the course of the nineteenth century.³² These interpretations, despite being grounded in the same fundamental American ideal of liberty, eventually grew more and more incompatible, until they were solidified as indisputable truths. This made a long-term American compromise all but impossible during the Secession Crisis, and as such forms the basis of the irreconcilable differences and moral abstraction strands that are evident in historiography.

³⁰ Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, pp. 214-216

³¹ Santayana, *Character & Opinion in the United States*, p. 115

³² Kenneth Stampp, *The Imperiled Union: Essays on the Background of the Civil War*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1980), p. 20

Historiographical Overview

In order to understand the reasoning behind the formulation of each strand, it is necessary to have a basic knowledge of the three main schools of Civil War historiography: the traditionalist, revisionist, and post-revisionist. The focus of this paper is on the latter two schools, as traditionalism covers a wide period of works from the onset of the Civil War until the 1930's. During this span of almost a century the historiography went through considerable phases of development, evolving from biased war time propaganda to empiricist accounts that attempted to present unbiased interpretations whilst reducing the conflict to a single identifiable cause.³³ The overall traditionalist conclusion in regards to the possibility of compromise however does not deviate from the theory of irrepressible conflict. In light of this I have included the traditionalist school in order to contextualize the revisionist and post-revisionist response to it, but I have not examined the specific historians within it with as much detail. Yet it is necessary to provide a cursory overview. For this I am indebted to Thomas J. Pressly's monograph *Americans Interpret their Civil War*, which gives an excellent description of the evolution of traditionalism. Although their exact method and conclusions in regards to the causation of the Civil War differ, the traditionalist, revisionist and post-revisionist schools all provide evidence to both the irreconcilable differences and moral abstraction arguments regarding the failure of compromise.

³³ Thomas J. Pressly, *Americans Interpret Their Civil War*, (Princeton University Press: 1962), p. 211

Traditionalists

It is the view of the traditionalist school that the Civil War was the result of an irrepressible conflict that could not have been prevented by any measure of compromise or even outright conciliation. Indeed, the conclusion of this first phase of historiography can be reduced to the idea that the sectional differences between the North and the South were simply too great to be overcome by any method other than warfare. Not only would it have been wrong to compromise in 1861, it would have been nothing more than a xtemporary measure against irreconcilable sectional conflict.³⁴ H. E. Von Holst, one of the founders of traditionalism, in particular is quite critical of past compromise attempts, describing them as ‘. . . concessions to the slavepower . . . that slowly converted the national government into an instrument of its own will.’³⁵ Regardless of whether the immoral institution of slavery, a multitude of sectional incompatibilities, or economic determinism is emphasized as the primary cause, traditionalists view the Civil War as an irrepressible conflict and as such dismiss compromise as an option during the Secession Crisis.

Revisionists

The revisionist school disagrees with this view. They still believe that compromise was not an option in the immediate days before the Civil War, yet not necessarily because it was always destined to fail as a result of irreconcilable differences. The idea of Southern nationalism, although ‘long in

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 226

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 75

the making' only coalesced during the Secession Crisis after all, and even though disagreements over tariffs and the extension of slavery had heightened sectional tensions, the maintenance of the Union had always been the motivating factor towards choosing compromise instead of conflict.³⁶ Prominent revisionists J. T. Randall, Charles W. Ramsdell, and Avery O. Craven argue that this desire amongst Southerners (and indeed, the majority of Americans) to work out sectional differences within the framework of the Union did not simply disappear in the wake of Lincoln's election.³⁷ However the adoption of radical antislavery views as the foundation of the Republican Party, and the dogmatic insistence of Republicans to regard the ideology of the South as unequivocally evil because it was based on slavery, prevented the views of the moderate Americans from being expressed.³⁸ Slavery could have been compromised over, had the North not been clouded by the reduction of slavery to an abstract issue of right and wrong. Indeed, the key factor behind the failure of compromise was the fact that such abstractions proliferated Congress during the nineteenth century and promoted a culture of extremist antagonism rather than moderate cooperation.³⁹

Post-Revisionists

From the middle of the twentieth century onwards a new school of scholarship emerged, that of the post-revisionists. As their name implies, these historians wrote in response to the revisionists, critiquing their accusatory claim that

³⁶ Avery O. Craven, *The Growth of Southern Nationalism 1845-1861*, (Louisiana State University Press: 1953), p. 390

³⁷ J. G. Randall, 'The Civil War Restudied', *Journal of Southern History*, VI (1940), p. 451

³⁸ Craven, *Civil War in the Making*, p. 37

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 91

Northern Republicans bear the most responsibility for the failure of compromise. Indeed, the antislavery ideals of the North were not pursued in the abstract in order to frustrate Southern political efforts. Rather, they were a true reflection of the morality of the average Northern constituent.⁴⁰ Eric Foner is the foremost proponent of this view, specifically in regards to the failure of compromise.⁴¹ However the post-revisionists form a far less cohesive school than the traditionalists or revisionists. Indeed, it is less of a school and more of a broad classification of the current phase of historiography. It includes the works of transitional revisionists such as Kenneth Stampp and David M. Potter, who do not solely blame the Republicans as the revisionists do but still emphasize the fact that compromise should have been possible, even if the circumstances could not have been less conducive towards it.⁴²

The ideological interpretation of Eugene D. Genovese also fits under the post-revisionist banner. Writing in response to the economic determinist theory of Charles Beard, Genovese argues that simply saying slavery was the cause of the Civil War is not enough; yes, it was a critical element both in the real and the abstract, but the main reason why it is so crucial to the irreconcilable differences theory is that it forms the economic base of Southern society.⁴³ An entirely separate civilization developed in the South from the base of slavery, complete with its own valid class structure, relations of production, and

⁴⁰ Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, p. 59, p. 61

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 316

⁴² Stampp, *And the War Came*, pp. 297-298; Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, pp. 522-23, p. 583

⁴³ Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy & Society of the Slave South*, (Pantheon Books: New York, 1966), p. 13

ideology.⁴⁴ From this base a hierarchical class structure developed that was neither feudal nor bourgeoisie but a synthesis of capitalist and prebourgeois ideologies.⁴⁵ This uniquely Southern ideology represents a completely valid superstructure. Distinct from the bourgeois industrial society of the North, the South had a different set of parameters it needed to progress (specifically relating to the reform of the relations of production without upsetting the class hierarchy) which were bound to cause conflict with the North.⁴⁶ In Genovese's view this was the only possible outcome within the framework of historical materialism, therefore a true, permanent compromise was never going to be a realistic option. Foner also reaches this conclusion by taking an ideological, but not strictly Marxist, approach to why compromise did not occur. By focusing on the antislavery, free market ideology of the Republican Party and how it accurately represents the traditional Northern middle class of small scale, economically independent producers, Foner illustrates how the Northern idea of progress clashed with the South's.⁴⁷ In essence, Genovese represents the definitive Marxist interpretation of the ante-bellum South whereas Foner provides a more refined ideological approach unbound by historical materialism.

⁴⁴ Eugene D. Genovese, "Marxian Interpretations of the Slave South" in *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, ed. Barton J. Bernstein, (Chatto & Windus: London, 1970), p. 100

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 112

⁴⁶ Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery*, p. 8

⁴⁷ Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, p. 9

Irreconcilable Differences, or the Irrepressible

Conflict

The first trend within historiography is the idea that compromise was simply impossible because of irreconcilable sectional differences. Although Northerners and Southerners shared a common heritage and identity as liberal Americans, over the course of the nineteenth century they developed distinctly different interpretations as to exactly what this identity meant. They remained united behind the idea that the United States symbolized the pinnacle of the civilized world; no other nation possessed the unique form of Constitutional democracy that allowed for the accurate representation and prosperity of its citizens.⁴⁸ One would be extremely hard-pressed to find an ante-bellum American, Northern or Southern, who disagreed with the fundamental ideals of liberty, prosperity, and progress. Yet if this was the case, it comes across as slightly unusual of William H. Seward, de facto leader of the Republican Party whilst Lincoln was staying in Springfield before his inauguration, to proclaim in 1858 that the nation was heading towards ‘. . . an irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces [that] means that the United States must and will, sooner or later, become entirely either a slave-holding nation, or entirely a free-labor nation.’⁴⁹ He goes on to say in the same speech that all sectional compromises over slavery, past and future, are rendered ‘vain and ephemeral’ by the failure to recognize that two sectional systems of labour cannot exist in

⁴⁸ Stamp, *The Imperiled Union*, p. 30

⁴⁹ William H. Seward, ‘Speech Delivered at Rochester, Monday, Oct. 25, 1858’, <https://archive.org/details/irrepressiblecon00insewa>, last accessed 10 Oct. 2014

harmony under one nation.⁵⁰ This display of fervent determinism casts some doubt over the sincerity of Seward's pursuit of compromise in the Secession Crisis. However it also forms the basis of the irreconcilable differences strand of historiography in regards to compromise. The opposing systems of labour, free, capitalist wage labour in the North and slavery in the South, were able to coexist in the early years of the Union because the path by which the United States was to progress territorially, economically, and ideologically had not been explicitly and formally defined.⁵¹ As a result, each section developed different interpretations of what progress was. Both were arguably valid under the Constitution and each reflected different elements of American liberty. Yet this only exacerbated sectional conflict, as both Northerners and Southerners could assert that their definition of progress was right based on the tenets of the Founding Fathers. While this is technically true, the fact that the United States was moving towards a more connected whole through the expansion of railroads and advance of industry meant that the strife caused by sectional ideologies was increasingly brought into open.⁵²

The issues of territorial, economic, and ideological progress are fundamentally linked, therefore it makes sense to examine their role in promoting the irrepressible conflict in unison. The principles of this argument hold that all Americans believed the United States was an enlightened nation with a manifest destiny to progress beyond its current borders and serve as a shining

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Stampp, *The Imperiled Union*, p. 20-21

⁵² Stahr, *Seward*, pp. 174-175

example of the ideal modern, liberal civilization for the rest of the world.⁵³ Yet the exact form this progressive expansion should take differed between each section. Furthermore, both the free-labour and slave-labour systems required access to expand into the Territories in order to sustain the respective societies from whence they came. The Northern system of free-labour required access to the Territories in order to secure economic and social progress. However the nature of this progress differed greatly from that of the South's, so much so that each territory could not operate under free and slave labour simultaneously.⁵⁴ Foner provides the basis of this argument. Even though he is the staunchest of the post-revisionists in defending the moral right of the Republicans in opposing the extension of slavery, his economic interpretation regarding the free-labour system of the North adds credence to the irreconcilable difference interpretation.⁵⁵

The need for reform in the slave based economy was a constant, lingering concern in the South.⁵⁶ The inefficiency of slave-labour, the destructive impact it had on farmland, and the danger of relying on a select few, undiversified crops were compelling reasons to reform the Southern economy.⁵⁷ Indeed, these defects in the plantation system had made the South susceptible to the economic downturns of 1819 and 1837, which had significant negative

⁵³ Craven, *Civil War in the Making*, p. 89

⁵⁴ For free-labour and the Territories see Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, pp. 54-57; for slave-labour and the Territories see Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery*, pp. 244-247, p. 261

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 310

⁵⁶ Sellers, 'The Travail of Slavery', p. 59

⁵⁷ Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery*, pp. 26-28

consequences for Southern society as a whole.⁵⁸ However it is precisely this close link between Southern society and slavery that made it so difficult to reform. Indeed, Genovese interprets the irreconcilable differences of North and South as resulting from the inability of class-conscious slaveholders to commit to a process of economic reform that would not weaken their position at the top of society.⁵⁹ This resulted in the Marxian irony of a prebourgeois, aristocratic uprising against the bourgeoisie in the name of securing the ideal method of economic reform, the unrestricted expansion of slavery.⁶⁰

Although there may not have been the strict class hierarchy that Genovese applies through historical materialism, there is no doubt that the society of the South built and sustained itself around a slave economy.⁶¹ Plantation owners saw the potential benefits of scaling down the domination of the traditional plantation in favour of promoting industrialisation and urbanisation. Yet they also realized that even a gradual move away from the 'king cotton' mentality entailed a number of potentially dangerous consequences (the social mobility of slaves and poor whites chief amongst these), and a concentrated effort would almost certainly result in their displacement as political elite.⁶² Because of this only extremely small scale reforms, based around the maintenance and extension of slavery (keeping North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia as

⁵⁸ For 1819 see Merrill D. Peterson, *Olive Branch and Sword – The Compromise of 1833*, (Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge, 1982), p. 7; For 1837 see Craven, *Civil War in the Making*, p. 23

⁵⁹ Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery*, pp. 28-30, pp. 34-35

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35

⁶¹ Stamp, *The Imperiled Union*, pp. 244-245

⁶² Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery*, p. 35

slave producing states to sell to the Territories) were eventually adopted.⁶³

However, this conservative restructure of the economy relied on new markets to sell slaves to. Without the freedom to extend slavery into the Territories, this scheme becomes little more than a temporary stop-gap in keeping slavery economically viable.⁶⁴ The slaveholders, faced with a choice between extensive reform with unpredictable social consequences or fighting to maintain their way of life, chose the latter during the Secession Crisis.

There is no doubt that the issue of governing a culturally united but economically separated nation served as a major catalyst for each sectional crisis. Indeed, the first instance of sectional compromise, the compromise of 1833, dealt with a high tariff on imported goods that benefited the burgeoning manufactories of the North but put undue strain on the less industrial South.⁶⁵ The compromise of 1850 was more about the political power that could be gained or lost through the extension of slavery into the Western Territories of Kansas, Nebraska, and New Mexico, yet because the growth of each respective labour system relied on being able to freely expand into these territories an argument can be made for the existence of an underlying economic cause for them as well.⁶⁶ In the slaveholder's interpretation they had been campaigning for their Constitutional right to take their property in slaves wherever they wished, be it states within the Union or prospective territories, almost since the inception of the Union itself. This is not to say that the Northern states had been aggressively attacking the South in Congress over this matter for that long.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 143-144

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 246-247

⁶⁵ Peterson, *Olive Branch and Sword*, p. 5

⁶⁶ Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, p. xxv

Rather, it is a manifestation of Stephens' view that the compromises of 1833 and 1850 represented scenarios where Northerners and Southerners had agreed to abide by certain conditions in the name of preserving the Union, yet the North had consistently violated their side of the compromise by insisting on an end to slavery.⁶⁷ In this light, Seward's firm belief in inevitable sectional conflict comes across as evidence of the North's implacability when it comes to compromise over slavery.

Therefore the view that pervaded the South in the Secession Crisis that compromise with the North (and especially the Republicans) was a futile effort is not wholly ungrounded. Indeed, the Secession Crisis was not the first time that sectional antagonisms had threatened the Union. South Carolina had come to the brink of seceding once before in 1832 over the perceived unconstitutionality of the protectionist economic system.⁶⁸ Secession, supported primarily by South Carolinian fire-eater John C. Calhoun, appeared to a viable solution in the face of extremely high tariffs on imported goods imposed in 1828, which were designed to promote American manufacturing and foster an independent economy, but clearly favoured burgeoning Northern industrialism over Southern producer economies that relied heavily on trade with England.⁶⁹ Yet despite divergent interests and a significant portion of South Carolinians being in favour of secession, the overwhelming opinion of the majority of Southerners was that remaining in the Union was by far the better option and all

⁶⁷ Stephens, 'Speech before the Legislature of Georgia: Milledgeville, November 14, 1860', pp. 569-573

⁶⁸ Peterson, *Olive Branch and Sword*, p. 1

⁶⁹ Irving H. Bartlett, *John C. Calhoun: A Biography*, (W. W. Norton & Company: New York, 1993), p. 178, p. 186

avenues towards this end should be pursued.⁷⁰ This led to the compromise of 1833, where the protectionists, represented by Henry Clay, agreed to gradually lower the tariff to a more moderate level over the next decade in exchange for the repeal of the Ordinance of Nullification.⁷¹ Although this did not solve the undercurrent of sectional antagonism, nor whether the right to secede was guaranteed by the Constitution, it did show that compromise in the name of the Union was possible. Not all Southerners were radical fire-eaters looking for any opportunity to secede; if Northern congressmen were willing to modify their sectional proposals to be more considerate of Southern interests than Southerners were willing to do the same for the North.⁷²

Such was the case with the Compromise of 1833, as well as the Compromise of 1850. Secession was again considered as a course of action in response to the Wilmot Proviso's restriction of the expansion of slavery into the Western Territories, yet after the possibility of a monolithic ruling on the institution was ruled out compromise became infinitely more favourable.⁷³ Rather than rallying behind a declaration that directly opposed Northern interests (as the Ordinance of Nullification did) the majority of Southerners chose to support the Georgia Platform, which stated that as long as the Fugitive Slave Law was upheld and the Constitutionality of slavery was respected, then they would be open to reaching a middle ground with the North.⁷⁴ The form of the Compromise of 1850 that reached Congress conceded on both of these grounds, therefore the

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 167

⁷¹ Peterson, *Olive Branch and Sword*, pp. 53-54

⁷² Bartlett, *John C. Calhoun: A Biography*, pp. 199-201

⁷³ Craven, *The Growth of Southern Nationalism*, pp. 89-91

⁷⁴ Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, p. 128

admission of California as a free state and the banning of the slave trade in Washington D. C. was acceptable.⁷⁵ Of course this was nowhere as definitive a conclusion to the issue of slavery as the Wilmot Proviso or the original compromise proposed by Henry Clay was, and it barely passed in a Congress dominated by staunch antislavery and proslavery factions, yet this does not change the fact that a compromise was reached in the wake of intense sectional rivalry.⁷⁶ Therefore in the view of the post-revisionists the compromises of 1833 and 1850 do not necessarily represent the history of success that Stephens attributes to them. They were successful in preventing secession (and in 1850 delaying the Civil War) however they did not resolve the fundamental ambiguities within the Constitution that ultimately caused them. This meant that while conflict was averted in the short term, there was nothing stopping the same divergent sectional interpretations of the Constitution from causing issues in the future.

A Question of Morality

The idea of moral abstractions overshadowing the reality of the causes of sectional strife and making any attempt to resolve them impossible is the second strand in historiography relating to the failure of compromise. Reducing such complex issues as slavery and Constitutional interpretation to a simple question of right and wrong made it incredibly difficult to discuss them in a reasoned manner and reach a compromise. There was nothing wrong with a congressman's morals or those of his electorate factoring into his actions in

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 114

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 112-114

Congress, yet it was considered unethical to make these morals the centre of congressional debates or an entire political platform.⁷⁷ The introduction of this personal morality, defined by certain undebatable truths (such as the evil of slavery) into the political system sabotaged any attempts at compromise.⁷⁸ Craven outlines the reasoning behind this view quite aptly: 'Men could compromise tariffs, internal improvements, and land programs; they must die for the preservation of their way of life, their ideals, and what they perceived to be a civilization.'⁷⁹ With this quote he also captures the spirit Stephens evoked in his speech before the Georgia Legislature. Stephens, a moderate man in favour of the Union, could look back in 1860 on the history of sectional compromise with approval; overcoming sectional differences in the name of the Union through compromise was infinitely preferable to disunion and war. Yet if Lincoln, the Republicans, or anyone else threatened the ideals that the South held to be right, than he was he would be willing to fight to defend them, especially if the citizens of Georgia voted for such an action in a convention.⁸⁰ This is exactly what occurred in the Secession Crisis. The respective conventions considering secession may not have passed with an overwhelming majority in every single state yet they voted in its favour nonetheless.⁸¹ No longer did South Carolina stand alone as in 1833; by February the entirety of the South was united in disunion. The citizens of the South had exercised their popular sovereignty and rallied behind the radical fire-eaters. However this does not mean the majority of Southerners thought slavery was a moral institution. On the contrary, they

⁷⁷ Craven, *Civil War in the Making*, p. 101

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 77

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 101

⁸⁰ Stephens, 'Speech before the Legislature of Georgia: Milledgeville, November 14, 1860', p. 573, p. 578

⁸¹ Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, pp. 498-499

realized that the peculiar institution went against their ideals of liberty and universal Christian love for your fellow man.⁸² The fact that Thomas Jefferson, the pinnacle figure of traditional Southern agrarian culture, recognized the evil of slavery and shared the view of the Founding Fathers that it had no place in the Union was not lost on Southerners, particularly slaveholders.⁸³ Despite this, as Charles Grier Sellers rightly asserts that 'A whole generation cannot transform its fundamental values by a mere effort of will.'⁸⁴ Although slaveholders understood the hypocrisy of believing in liberty for all men whilst existing off the labour of slaves, they could not see a way to remove slavery without upsetting the very fabric of their society.⁸⁵ In this sense the moral abstraction argument intersects with the irreconcilable differences theory. But rather than emphasizing economic factors, it is conflicted morality that serves as the basis of sectional antagonism.

However, the leaders of the Confederacy did not seek a war of aggression with the Union. But they were determined to defend what they saw as their right to live under their interpretation of Constitutional liberty.⁸⁶ Likewise, Lincoln did not wish to incite a destructive war, but he also did not believe the right for a state to secede from the Union at will was guaranteed by the constitution. Nor for that matter was the protection and extension of slavery. Lincoln had clearly outlined his stance on this matter during his debates with proslavery Democrat Stephen A. Douglas:

⁸² Sellers, 'The Travail of Slavery', pp. 68-69

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 45

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47

⁸⁵ Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery*, pp. 24-26

⁸⁶ Stampp, *The Imperiled Union*, p. 20, p. 35

‘The Republican Party hold that this government was instituted to secure the blessings of freedom, and that slavery is an unqualified evil to the negro, to the white man, to the soil, and to the State. Regarding it as an evil, they will not molest it in the States where it exists . . . ; but they will use every constitutional method to prevent the evil from becoming larger . . .’⁸⁷

Lincoln reiterated this opinion again whilst he awaited his inauguration, directing all who sought his view on compromise towards his past speeches. His response to Stephens’ speech reinforces this view as well:

‘Do the people of the South really entertain fears that a Republican administration would, *directly* or *indirectly* interfere with the slaves or with them about the slaves? If they do, I wish to assure you . . . that there is no cause for such fears. The South would be in no more danger than in the days of Washington. I suppose, however, that does not meet the case. You think slavery is *right* and ought to be extended; while we think it is *wrong* and ought to be abolished. That, I suppose . . . is the only substantial difference between us.’⁸⁸

While Lincoln assures Stephens that he will not interfere slavery as it exists, an argument can be made that he is being deterministic and reductionist by ignoring the reality of preserving the Union in favour of abstract moral absolutism. However it is far more likely that Lincoln is emphasizing that despite the sectional differences that divided North and South, they were all still Americans united under the Constitution. The other factor that is important to note here is that thinking slavery should be abolished does not make Lincoln a

⁸⁷ Abraham Lincoln, ‘Speech at Edwardsville, Illinois, Sep. 11, 1858’, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln Vol III*, ed. Roy P. Basler, (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, 1953), p. 94

⁸⁸ Lincoln, ‘Letter to Alexander H. Stephens, Dec. 22 1860’, pp. 160-161

radical abolitionist. It is true that abolitionist sentiment was stronger among some Republicans more than others and greatly influenced the antislavery ideal. Despite this, active abolition was not the objective of the Republican Party.⁸⁹ Rather, their goal was that of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton and the other Founding Fathers: the gradual end of slavery. Therefore there could be no compromise over the extension of slavery.

This is reflected in the traditionalist school. Indeed, the earliest incarnations of the moral abstraction argument are found within, represented in the writings of men who lived through the Civil War. As such they are heavily influenced by the partisan opinions held during the war. Affixing war guilt is the primary concern of these works; the issues surrounding compromise are not dealt with in detail, yet in the quest to justify the war a strand of thought exists that still defines modern historiography: the immorality of slavery.⁹⁰ Southern authors of this period were united behind Jefferson Davis' interpretation of the war as the fault of the North, justifying secession through state sovereignty and asserting that the conflict was not centred around slavery.⁹¹ However it is the Northern accounts that shape traditionalism in regards to compromise. The North is characterized as succeeding in a great moral struggle, fighting for true freedom against the evil of slavery. Slaveholders as opposed to Southerners are singled out as the guilty party, for they deceived the Southern states into a rebellion in the name of defending the source of their prosperity.⁹² This idea of a conspiracy of Southern leaders can be seen as a method of encouraging national unity during the

⁸⁹ Stampp, *The Imperiled Union*, pp. 133-135

⁹⁰ Pressly, *Americans Interpret their Civil War*, p. 39, p. 210

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 125

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 64

reconstruction by absolving the majority of Southerners from direct responsibility for the war. However it does not detract from the main argument that the South aggressively rebelled to protect slavery and the North was right in fighting to bring about the destruction of the institution.⁹³ Therefore it is the view of the early Northern traditionalists that slavery could not and should not have been compromised over.

Craven and Stamp disagree with this interpretation. They believe that compromise should have been possible but was made impossible by this very reduction of complex issues such as slavery, state's rights, and national progress to extreme moral dualisms that obscured the true nature of these issues and prevented the formulation of a true compromise.⁹⁴ Although both Northern and Southern congressmen fell prey to these abstractions, the majority of the blame is placed on Northern Republicans who let the radical elements of antislavery ideology dominate their party platform.⁹⁵ In this sense, the revisionists are placing the blame for the Civil War squarely at the feet of the Republicans, although they do not state this explicitly. Randall comes the closest to directly indicting the Republican Party, claiming that they brought the cause of radical abolitionism into politics without any real desire to settle it.⁹⁶ He does not deny that the emotions surrounding antislavery were very much real and justified; rather, he argues that the slavery issue was largely fabricated and certainly not the sole cause of the Civil War.⁹⁷ The reality of slavery in 1860 was

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 67

⁹⁴ Craven, *Civil War in the Making*, p. vii, pp. 65-66, p. 91; Stamp, *And the War Came*, p. 45

⁹⁵ J. G. Randall, "The Civil War Restudied", *JSH*, VI (1940), p. 447

⁹⁶ Randall, "The Civil War Restudied", p. 447

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

‘ . . . trivial as to interests that were in fact threatened; yet . . . tragically important as a popular and political troublemaker.’⁹⁸ The interests that Randall is referring to in this instance are those directly pertaining to the preservation of the Union. Slavery, especially the status of slavery in the territories, is regarded more as the battleground of sectional differences in the abstract sense as opposed to being a realistic issue in the Secession Crisis.⁹⁹ Although Randall does not explain in great detail his reasoning behind this view, his meaning and that of the revisionist school as a whole becomes more illuminated when contextualized with that of Charles W. Ramsdell. Ramsdell explores the reality of slavery in the decade leading up to the Civil War and the feasibility of its expansion into the territories, as well as the likelihood of the institution’s survival had the Civil War not destroyed it.¹⁰⁰ He concluded that by 1860 slavery was a cumbersome and unprofitable economic system that could only sustain itself if it had a steady supply of new land to cultivate. Because the Western Territories were wholly unsuited to growing cotton slavery could not possibly expand there, therefore whether or not it was allowed in the territories was a moot point.¹⁰¹ Slavery had undeniably reached its apex and could only decline, especially in the face of growing Northern resistance to the institution. Indeed, if the Republicans had not taken the initiative and brought about the destruction of slavery by force, Ramsdell predicted that within a generation slavery would have ceased to exist within the Union.¹⁰² This is what Randall means when he refers to slavery as ‘trivial’ to the interests of preserving the Union. The intense

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 446

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 451

¹⁰⁰ Charles W. Ramsdell, ‘The Natural Limits of Slavery Expansion’, *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (1929), p. 111

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

agitation behind the abstraction that is the morality of slavery obfuscated the reality of the institution's inevitable, natural demise. By adopting elements of the radical antislavery ideal into their party platform, the Republicans made compromise on slavery impossible.

The Randall-Ramsdell synthesis theory is exemplary of the central element of the revisionist school, however not all revisionists and their post-revisionist detractors are as intensely sectional in emphasizing the role of the Republicans in the failure of compromise. Indeed, it is not necessarily just the Republican's fault for refusing to back down from a radical antislavery position, after all, it is their moral prerogative and undoubtedly represented the ideology of a significant number of Northerners.¹⁰³ Southern congressmen also engaged in political discourse through abstraction, although instead of slavery it is state's rights and the Southern interpretation of the Constitution that are expressed in dualistic rhetoric.¹⁰⁴ This inclusive viewpoint is made evident in Craven's reading of Lincoln and Stephen's correspondence. He reads Lincoln's letter to Alexander H. Stephens as a manifestation of Republican implacability at worst and a gross oversimplification at best.¹⁰⁵ However he also views Stephens' reply as reductionist, but instead of reducing the issue of resolving sectional differences to slavery he takes it back to the unconstitutionality of the Republicans in interfering with 'men's private opinions' in regards to slavery.¹⁰⁶ To Craven this exchange is evidential of the manner in which Americans from above and below the Mason-Dixon Line had adopted intractable, opposing

¹⁰³ Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, p. ix

¹⁰⁴ Stampp, *The Imperiled Union*, p.

¹⁰⁵ Craven, *Civil War in the Making*, p. 67

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 68

ideals in the political realm.¹⁰⁷ This is the end result of a decade of increased radicalism in the North and a coalescence of a defensive culture in the South.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, Southerners were more open to secession in 1860 than they were in 1833 or 1850 precisely because they were reacting to aggressive Northern attitudes rather than a sectional, different, yet valid, approach to how the Union should progress.¹⁰⁹ Synthesis through compromise was not possible when the leading ideology of the North was steadfast in opposing the basis of Southern society, even when the realities of slavery itself had little to do with the preservation of the Union.¹¹⁰ Therefore even though the South became embroiled in the culture of abstractions just as much as the North did, the ascendance of Southern radical thought is interpreted by the revisionists as a response to the overt, antagonistic antislavery sentiment of the North that became more and more enshrined in American politics.

Fundamental Ambiguity

To be involved in American politics in the first half of the nineteenth century meant to take part in public debates, arguing the potential benefits and downsides of any issue and reaching an informed synthesis that was best for the majority. Santayana attests to this fundamental element of the American spirit: 'Americans love debate; they love sitting round a table as if in consultation, even . . . when each of the participants listens only to his own

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 103

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 86

remarks and votes according to his party.¹¹¹ Indeed, a love of fervent, public politics is one fundamental American ideal that is truly unambiguous. For how could American citizens fully engage in the democratic process if they did not know what the congressmen representing them stood for, or if their opinions were being accurately represented? This is why 'A public man must show himself in public, even if not to [his] advantage.'¹¹² Alexander H. Stephens did not choose to speak before the Georgia Legislature in the early days of the Secession Crisis. He spoke at the people of Georgia's behest; they desired to hear his views on secession and, even though he was not a congressman at this point, he fulfilled his duty as an American politician by obliging them.¹¹³ Stephens believed in the Union. But he also believed in the citizens of Georgia. He was not a fire-eater proclaiming secession from the supposed shackles of the federal government. Yet if Georgia felt that its economic interests, ideology, and very way of life were being threatened by the antislavery policies of the Republicans, then he would support it with the entirety of his being.¹¹⁴ The citizens of Georgia did indeed feel this way, as indicated by the overwhelming vote in favour of secession in the Legislature, 208 to 89.¹¹⁵ Therefore although Stephens would continue to support the Union, he could also faithfully serve Georgia, and the Confederacy that it would later join, in seceding from the United States.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Santayana, *Character and Opinion in the United States*, p. 114

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Johnson, Browne, *The Life of Alexander H. Stephens*, p. 367

¹¹⁴ Stephens, 'Speech before the Legislature of Georgia: Milledgeville, November 14, 1860', p. 578

¹¹⁵ Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, p. 498

¹¹⁶ Von Abele, *Alexander H. Stephens: A Biography*, pp. 191-192

Presenting his views for public debate did not advance Stephens' cause, in fact it harmed it. The same can be said of John J. Crittenden and Thomas Corwin; regardless of their motives, both of their compromises failed. This was partially due to the vagaries of party politics. However it was not as simple as congressmen ignoring the issue at hand and voting in the name of sectional interests. After all, the issue they were attempting to resolve was not a minor matter, it was the preservation of the Union. So why did compromise fail during the Secession Crisis? Again, this question cannot be definitively answered by this paper. The main strands in historiography offer two potential answers in the irreconcilable differences and moral abstraction theories. Both are plausible, and not necessarily incompatible. For they are united by the idea of the Northern and Southern sections developing different definitions of progress and liberty that were ultimately proven irreconcilable. The fundamental ambiguity of slavery in the Constitution allowed for these definitions to evolve alongside each other and the spirit of American democracy allowed for them to be debated and compromised over, for a time. However,

‘A certain vagueness of soul, together with a great gregariousness and tendency to be moulded by example and by prevalent opinion, is requisite for feeling free under liberty. You must find the majority right enough to live with; you must give up lost causes; you must be willing to put your favourite notions to sleep in the family cradle of convention.’¹¹⁷

Neither the fire-eaters nor the radical Republicans were willing to give up their respective views on slavery. And although the majority of Americans were not radicals, radical thought undoubtedly influenced the political and social climate

¹¹⁷ Santayana, *Character & Opinion in the United States*, p. 122

in the decade leading up to the Civil War. This, combined with the opposing interpretations of liberty made possible by the fundamental ambiguity of the Constitution, made an enduring American compromise all but impossible during the Secession Crisis.

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